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Summary: In which Hopper takes Mike on a drive to clear the air and lay down some ground rules. Should be a two shot, maybe more.

1. Chapter 1

The Ride

Jim Hopper did not like having Mike Wheeler at the cabin. Especially, when he was not accompanied by friends. He understood the need the let Jane see him, but he certainly wasn't going to to encourage it go any further than friendship. As such, he poli-chaperoned their visits like a vulture circling its prey. Leaning against the kitchen counter with arms folded and sporting his perfected scowl, The Sheriff watched and waited for the boy to step over a boundary.

Every so often, El-Jane would look over at him and stick out her tongue or scrunch up her face in consternation. He would have to have her look that one up. He narrowed his eyes and in return, but curled his lip to let her know he was not mad at her. He had done his best to prepare her for the drama of relationships while at the same time trying to deter her from anything serious. The trouble with this situation was that it was not normal at all; in any way. Mike had saved her life just as she had saved his, more than once. He had protected her; kept her safe. He had become her friend when the world had turned against her. There was no finding fault with that.

He watched closely, as Mike's arm, which was on the back of the couch, creeped toward Jane's opposite shoulder. *Brazen move, Kid.* Just as the hand came to rest and Jane turned to look at it, Hopper was off the counter and at the couch in a flash. He tapped the boy on the head and raised his eyebrows in a threat. The Wheeler kid had never been on Hopper's radar before the events of last year, but ever since Jane's return, he had taken exception with Hopper. The kid had the nerve to shrug at him, and not move is arm. That was all it took for Hopper to move the arm himself and round the couch to face the two of them.

"Jane, Mike and I need to have a talk," he declared, though peacefully. It won't take long, but it's going to happen right now."

He waited for her to explode, to call him names, even to use her powers to throw something at him. It didn't happen. She looked at

him, a hurt in her eyes which appeared whenever she was to be separated from Mike. However, her eyes showed something else, something new. Trust. It was a mighty validation for a dad.

"Will he back?" she asked.

"I haven't decided," Hopper responded, truthfully. "We're going for a drive. It is not bad. But, it is necessary. Understand?"

"I understand," she replied, fixing him with a solemn gaze. "What time will you be back?"

Hopper looked at his watch. It was already 3:30. "No later than 4-1-5."

Hopper saw Mike look at his own watch. "Forty-five minutes?"

"I have a lot to say," Hopper replied, directly.

Mike had been quiet up to that point, his face showing a battle over what attitude he intended to take with the Sheriff. Hopper thought the kid should be showing a little more fear that he was. But, he guessed the kid had not decided to the let their beef go. That was problem with kids. All emotions and hormones and self righteousness.

Hopper nodded at Jane and told Mike it was time to go. The boy stood as did Jane and they hugged. Hopper did not interfere.

Once they were in the truck, the Sheriff rolled down he window and shook a cigarette from the pack which had been sitting on he dashboard. He lit it and took a long drag.

"You shouldn't be smoking with a kid in your car," Mike said, defiantly.

Hopper took the cigarette from his mouth and pointed it the boy. "And, you shouldn't be talking right now. This will be a one sided conversation." Hopper looked at the cigarette and, frustrated by some unknown guilt, pitched it out the window.

"I know what you're going to say, Sheriff," Mike began, trying to head

off what he thought would be a lecture on how to treat girls.

"Do you, now?" Hopper replied, incredulous. "Please enlighten me."

The boy shook his mop of black hair in irritation at having to actually explain himself. "You don't want us kissing or me putting my arm around her. You don't want us sitting too closely together. You don't want us to touch each other at all!"

"You're damn right, I don't!" Hopper snapped. "You're 12. She's 13-ish. Holding hands is a major concession. Get me?

Mike was silent, barely managing to contain his emotions.

"If I had my way, you wouldn't be seeing her at all. That stunt you pulled at the Byers house, the night The Gate was closed. It was out of line. And the attit-"

"-We thought she w-" Mike tried to interject.

"Keep you mouth shut and listen," Hopper growled, silencing the interruption. "I don't care if you thought she was dead. That's what I wanted. That's what was needed for her to stay safe. Believe it or not, that's what it took to keep you safe too. I was not and am not concerned about your 'feelings' for El. My primary concern is that she is safe, protected, and loved. By me."

Mike seethed. His white face shaded to a dark pink. "That's not fair!" he shouted.

Hopper fought to control his own emotions. This was not is son, but the kid was party of 'family' which had shared a uniquely traumatic experience. An experience which had bound them all together in a way that he imagined only combat soldiers understood. His grimace softened.

"I never said it was fair, Mike," He said, evenly. "It just is. El-Jane-my daughter, is not a normal person. I know you understand that. But, you have to understand that it's not only about the power she has inside her. It's about..."

A lump formed in Hopper's throat. He fought to even keep the

welling of tears in his eyes. He would not show a weakness, if that's even what it was, in front of this kid.

"It's about the fact that she was raised as a machine. Do you understand me? A machine. The people at Hawkins Lab abused her physically, mentally, psychologically. All that shit! They didn't teach her to read or write. They didn't teach her to talk more than to understand commands and respond to a few simple questions. She was an animal to them. But an animal that could do the tricks they needed done.

Mike didn't talk; the angry color fading form his face. His hands were in his lap and his head was down. Hopper got the impression he was listening. He continued.

"One of those tricks was making contact with the...what did you guys call it? The Demigorgan? Just imagine how scared he was. Is she strong. Of course! But, do you think a little girl with no family or friends, no love or support, could handle real fucking monster from another dimension?"

"She did," Mike whispered, his head still down. "She killed it."

"Damn straight, she killed it," Hopper agreed. "Because she couldn't let you and the others die. What did that get her? A one way trip to the Upside Down. Alone."

Mike was wringing his hands now. "I get it. At least, I think I get it. But it still sucks."

Hopper shook another cigarette from the pack and lit it. "Okay, Kid. Let me have it."

To be concluded...

2. Chapter 2

A/N: Thank you to those that reviewed! This has been fun to write and I am glad you are enjoying it.

"El needs-"

"Let me stop you right there," Hopper interjected. "You don't know what El needs."

Will finally looked Hopper squarely in the eye. "Will you let me talk? You told me to 'let you have it.'"

Hopper chuckled and blew smoke out the window. "Go on, then."

"I'm not some dumb kid who doesn't grasp the larger implications," Mike began, defensively. "I get that there are 'bad men' looking for her. I get that he was abused. I get that she is only safe in a cabin deep in the woods. I even get that she needs you. But she needs me, too!

Mike's intensity rose with each item he listed, emotion getting the better of him as he mentioned himself.

"You probably think it's dumb, just some childish 'feelings', but El and I have a connection. It's more than friends, more than family, more than love. It's in my bones, Sheriff."

"Your bones, huh," Hopper mumbled through his cigarette.

This comment had Mike flushing again in anger and shaking his head in defiant disbelief. "I'm not sure why we're even talking. You said it would be one sided and you're right. Don't ask me for my side if you don't want hear it."

Hopper tossed the second cigarette and took a deep breath. "Listen, Mike, I know what you're trying to say-"

"Do you?" Mike challenged. "I protected her before you even knew who she was. If you want to question that be my guest. Bad men, Sheriff! I made sure she had food. I made sure she had shelter. I made

sure she was *safe*!"

"Exactly!" Hopper replied, keeping his voice even with effort. "You found a wounded animal and you cared for it. You bonded with a scared girl who was little more than feral."

Angry tears filled Mike's eyes. He turned to Hopper, those tears streaking his face. "El is not an animal!"

"Don't you think I know that!" Hopper yelled in response. "But she is my daughter before she is anything to you."

"Are you really this mean? Are you just going to shut me down and make me feel like a 'bad man' for wanting to see her?"

It was the sheriff's turn to be silent. He grimaced and looked out the window. He, too, shook his head in at the short sightedness of the kid in his passenger seat.

"She saved my life my life at the quarry. You may not understand, but I was ready to die for Lucas and Dustin. I stepped over the ledge. She saved me! Caught me in mid air and brought me back. She killed the Demogorgon and save our lives. My life. Again."

Hopper was not surprised by the kid's emotions, but he was surprised by something in his voice. The kid was telling the truth. He ever expected that Wheeler's feelings were false, but he thought El needed protection from Hawkins Lab and from Mike Wheeler. Was he the one being short sighted? Damn this kid for making him think outside the box. The box Jane was in.

"Let's both take a deep breath, Kid," Hopper said, returning to as pleasant a tone as he was able. He took the breath and waited for Wheeler to do the same. Hopper saw that the fight was going out of the boy. He seemed suddenly small in the seat next to him, folded in on himself. "Deep breath," he repeated.

"Okay," Mike replied, taking the demanded breath. He looked just as sullen afterward.

"We've both been through a lot," Hopper offered in peace. "We've both had to adapt."

"I think you mean suffer," Mike said. "That's what I've been doing."

"You think it's been easy for me?" Hopper replied, before thinking better of sharing his domestic hardships with a thirteen year old boy.

"She was with you," Mike answered, finally opening his own window. "The whole time."

Hopper took that moment to pull the truck over to the side of the road. He turned to Mike, his left arm draped over the steering wheel.

"You're right, Mike," he said, nodding his head in thought. "She was. And, I would do it again. But, don't think that just because I'm hard on you or think you're too young to be in love that I don't respect you. I know what you did. I know the kind of pain you're talking about. I know what you went through with El. What I need to understand is that I have different responsibilities than you do. I am her dad and I am the man you are going to have to deal with. If you and I are going to get along, you *will* show me the proper respect. It is so crazy to think that this is about so much more than us. But at the same time, it is exactly about us. Do you get me?"

Mike never broke eye contact until the Hopper finished. He looked at his hands and nodded in understanding and surrender.

"I'm sorry, Sheriff Hopper," he said, sitting up straight. "I guess I've been selfish. It's easier to be mad at you for keeping her a secret and keeping her away from me."

"Yep," agreed Hopper, allowing a small smile to emerge. "But, you're not alone. When it comes to El, it's hard not to want her for yourself. "

To be continued…

3. Chapter 3

The Ride Chapter 3

In the following silence, Hopper turned the truck around and headed back to the toward the cabin. Neither of them spoke for a while; each lost in their own thoughts about El.

Mike broke the silence.

"What was it like?" he asked, tentatively.

"What's that, kid?" Hopper replied earnestly, knowing full well what the boy was asking about.

"Life with El."

Hopper blew out a sigh and reached the for the pack of cigarettes, now sitting in his cup holder. He eyed the opening, noticing only three rolls left. Impulsively, he threw it out the window. He immediately regretted the decision for two reasons. He could have been seen littering and now he had no cigarettes. He turned back to Mike, who looked as if he had just witnessed and odd ritual that defied explanation.

"What?" the Sheriff asked, in seeming denial of his break in character.

Mike laughed. This was odd in itself because Hopper had never seen it happen. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing," Mike replied, looking away.

Hopper rolled his eyes at the kid's awkwardness. "It was ups and downs; though more up than down. But the downs are none of your business."

"Okay," Mike agreed. "But what did you do during all that time?"

"I'm not gonna talk about that right now," the Sheriff replied, directly, but without anger. "We still have bigger fish to fry."

"I guess so," Mike replied, deflating. He had hoped the heavy lifting was over. It wasn't.

"What do you think El sees in you?" Hopper asked, watching the road. "It's not a mean question, Kid. It's a question about her. You know this won't be easy, right. Being El's friend is one thing. Being her...something else won't always be longing stares and comfortable silences. It's hard enough with women who know how to express themselves with words. This situation is different. She can't express herself as well as the rest of us. At, least not yet. While she's soft spoken and reserved most of the time, she can also be easily frustrated an short tempered. You have have to be patient Mike."

"I have to be *patient*?" Mike replied, incredulously. "You're kidding, right?"

"Don't get all riled up," Hopper said to defuse the kid's next outburst. "You know what I mean."

"She has a lot of learning to do and the curve is bigger than you think. She runs mostly on emotions, feelings. As much as they are important, they have to be tempered by reason. I can't believe I'm say this stuff, much less to you."

"If it helps," Mike replied, affably. "You're making sense.

Hopper drummed the steering wheel to give himself a moment to think. He needed a smoke.

"You asked what I think El sees in me. Maybe she sees some like herself; her own age, I mean, who showed her kindness. Someone who didn't judge, but accepted her immediately. I didn't know where she came from. I didn't care. I knew she was scared. We were nice to her. What else can I say?"

"I don't think you need to say anything else," Hopper replied. "I think you nailed it on the head. She wouldn't be here if it weren't for you. I can be a proud son of a bitch, but not too proud to admit that. Her's the deal. I'm going to let you spend more time with her. Any fool can see, and thankfully there aren't that many of us, that you and El have a connection. Damn, I hate that word! Connection. We're going to

have to come up with a new one. But there will be some boundaries. El and I have some rules. Those rules will have to be amended to include you."

"We're not stupid?" Mike said, his voice suddenly full of hope.

"Is that a question?" the Sheriff retorted. "Because, I'm going to need to see, without a doubt, that *you* are not stupid. It sounds like El has already share this with you so I'm going to make it simple. She is more important than you. Her safety is paramount. You threaten that by being stupid and you get cut off. Since we're on the subject, let's review what stupid would look like for Mike Wheeler."

"You don't have to go there," Mike interrupted. "We already talked about touching, kissing, and putting my arm around her shoulder."

Hopper smiled, a toothy Cheshire Cat grin. "That was when you were pissed off and wanting throw them at me like knives. Now, things are quieter and you're going to listen respectfully. Stupid means kissing El. Stupid is snuggling. Stupid is showing up unannounced. Stupid is talking about El at school or at home. Stupid is talking about Hawkins Lab. Stupid is doing El's homework. Stupid is teaching El inappropriate language aside from what she already knows. I know what she knows, Mike. Stupid is asking El to use her powers for anything other than saving lives. Maximum stupid; and, I mean zero tolerance, immediate trip back to isolation stupid, is sex."

"It-It's not like that. At all," Mike stammered, blushing at mention of sex.

"I'm not arguing with you, Kid," Hopper declared. "If you want to see El, you won't be stupid. Oh, and, I'm sure there will be a few more additions to the list. I'm just getting started."

Mike sighed, nodding his compliance. It was a sigh of acceptance and a sigh of relief. He touched Hopper's arm to get his attention. "I'm not stupid, Sheriff. When it comes to El, I can't afford to be."

Hopped nodded in a show of respect to the serious minded teen. "I'm glad we understand each other."

4. Chapter 4

The Ride Chapter 4

When Hopper and Mike returned to the cabin, El was waiting patiently; if you would called chewing her finger nails and pacing the front porch, patient. She was very pleased to see that Mike was still in the Blazer as it crept up the dirt driveway.

She watched as Mike opened the door and emerged. He didn't look happy, but he didn't appear sad either. El knew this well. Half way happy. She imagined this is how it would turn out. Mike would not get everything he wanted and dad knew it would hurt her too much to keep them apart.

Mike approached her with a smile, it getting bigger the closer her got to her. He did not take her hand, but stood next to her as Hopper rounded the vehicle and ushered them inside with an absent grunt. El didn't move and, which gave Mike the courage to stay put as well.

"Suit yourselves," Hopper said with a relenting sigh. "But don't be long. The temperature is dropping fast."

El was lost in Mike's golden brown eyes and and he was similarly lost in hers.

"Ten minutes, kids!" the Sheriff declared, more loudly.

"Okay," El replied, looking at Hopper and nodding her understanding. She turned back to Mike. "How did it go?"

"It was okay," Miked answered, with a shrug. "He's overprotective. But, it's hard to argue that keeping you out of danger is the most important thing."

"What is over-predective?" El asked, mild concern, knitting her brow.

"Over-protect-ive", Mike kindly corrected. "It means he wants to keep you safe, but he's taking it too far. He's got you in this cabin, but it's more of a cage if he won't let you see me or the rest of the guys."

El's eyes darkened. "This is not a cage," she replied, sharply. Though El new she didn't have the kind of freedom she wanted, she knew there was a good reason for it. Dad could be cranky sometimes, but he loved her and would do what it took make sure the bad men never came back. "This is home."

"I'm sorry," Mike said. "I didn't mean it that way. I just mean that I wish Hopper were more relaxed about it all. He's so uptight."

"Up-tight?" she asked. El knew she had a lot to learn, more words all the time. It was easy to get frustrated having to look words up or having to have everything explained to her. But, she had gotten almost used used to it and realized that if she stopped learning new words, it would be worse.

"It means serious all the time," Miked added. "Never having fun or relaxing. Always worried."

El regarded him with interest but said: "We're not stupid, Mike."

"Yeah," Mike said though a grimace. "Hopper made that abundantly clear. You've told me about the rules before, El, but he seems to want to make more rules just for me."

She looked at him with nothing but unabashed affection. She pulled him into a hug and whispered into his ears: "It will be okay. He is a good dad."

She withdrew from the hug, but only enough so that their noses barely touched. Mike seemed to stiffen his her grasp, but had learned that it was nervousness. He no reason to be nervous with her. She was his and there was no one else. Max had said that boys are can be weird when hugging or kissing. That had to be it. She closed her eyes and rested her forehead on his.

"I hope so," Mike whispered. "It would be worse now, if he were to separate us. I couldn't stand not being able to see you. I love you.

El knew that love had many meanings. She had looked it up. She had studied it. She *loved* her dad. She *loved* her friends. She *loved* Eggos. But, most of all, she *loved* Mike. She pulled him closer into a deeper

hug; one that she wanted to pull him into herself and never let him go. Was it possible for them to be one person. So totally given over to each other? She didn't answer him with words, but she knew he knew she felt the same way.

"I won't be stupid, El. Hopper means what he says about the rules. If I obey the rules, then he will let us see each other."

"It is a good thing," she said finally. "He knows you are important, Mike. I told him."

"I know, El," he said softly. "I know. We should get inside. Hopper was right about the cold."

The two teens turned and entered the cabin hand in hand.

Later, after dinner at the Byers' and a rather quiet ride home, Hopper and El sat on the couch watching *Hill Street Blues*. He knew it was a show she probably shouldn't be watching, but he liked it and he wanted to share the time with her. The two of them had come to another compromise; one that was more flexible, but also important: No talking during stories. Stories being El's soaps and Hopper's police shows. There were exceptions, of course, but on the whole, they tried to keep quiet while watching TV.

As the show wrapped up, Hopper could tell that Jane wanted to talk. He was surprised that she had waited this long, but kept his peace waiting for her to bring it up.

"Mike is not a *bad man*," she stated without preamble. "You know that."

Hopper turned to her, a smile of understanding on his face. "I know, Kid. But I had to put the fear if God into him, didn't I?

She looked nonplussed and Hopper should have known by now that he needs to speak in simpler terms. "Now that he knows you are alive and wants to see you *constantly,* I had make sure he understood the rules. Not just the rules about keeping you safe, but the rules about how close you can be."

"It's not bad...being close," El said. "Friends are close. They hug."

"Sure they do," Hopper replied, affably. "They play games. They talk. They go places together. Or, in your case, they are going to come here and visit."

"Mike is a special friend," El said, more for herself than for Hopper. "I love him."

Resisting the urge to tense up and pounce on that comment, Hopper remained calm. "How do you love him, Jane? We've talked about love. You know there are different kinds. Friends, family, boy and girls, loving things. Which is it with Mike?

She regarded him closely. He suspected she was trying to determine if he was lying or trying to trick her. Though she as already next to him, he wrapper in a hug which he hoped would tell her the truth.

"Listen to me, Sweetheart," he said, softly. "I know that Mike is a special friend. We have talked about that.

They had talked about it more times than Hopper could count. But he was happy to do it again, especially since he read Wheeler the riot act and Jane was needing reassurance.

"I have to look out for you in a lot of ways. One of those ways is making sure you don't grow up too fast. You have already been through hell. I don't want you rushing into something where you could end of getting hurt."

"Mike would not hurt me!" El said forcefully. "He loves me."

Hopper raised his hands in submission. More word confusion."No, not like that. He would never be *bad* like that. The hurt I'm talking about is more...heart hurt." He pointed to his heart. "Boys can be selfish; they can say and do things they later feel bad about. But it still hurts."

Jane nodded. "Girls, too."

"Oh yes," Hopper agreed with letting a small laugh escape his lips. He reach out and caressed her face, moving stray curls behind her left ear. "Jane. I love you. I love you so much. Dad love. And, because I love you, I want you to love Mike like a friend. For now."

She started chewing the inside of her cheek and started to pull away from him. He let her go, though it wasn't far.

"Mike more than a friend...Dad," she replied, simply. "I can't pretend he is not. It would be a lie. Friends. Don't. Lie." She smiled ruefully, having played her best hand, but Hopper wasn't down for the count just yet.

He nodded, pursing his lips in thought before saying: "That's right. You are absolutely right, Jane. Friends don't lie. So, here is the compromise. You and Mike are special friends. I get it. In fact, I'm okay with it. There is definitely something powerful between the two of you. But you are 13 years old and you are not ready, so not ready, for physical part of being a 'special friend'. So, to that end, I do not want any kissing that is more than a peck on the cheek. You can hold hands, even snuggle if watching a movie, but nothing more. Understand?"

He doubted she fully understood. He had not had a sex talk with her, because there was so much social stunting that had a occurred, it was hard for him to affirm any confessions of that kind of love. What he had to do was try to maintain the status quo for the next few months while she advanced in her studies and interactions with her friends.

She nodded, and for some inexplicable reason, started sobbing. It didn't appear to be a negative sobbing. They weren't angry tears. She looked at him smiling through the sobs. She threw her arms around his neck and hugged him tight.

"You okay, Kid?" he whispered in her ear.

"Happy," she replied, peacefully.

Fin